

The Chisholm Trail

The 19th century cattle industry in Texas was the catalyst to economic recovery after the Civil War. Cattle were raised in Texas, but they had to be driven north to markets where they could fetch a fair price. The Chisholm Trail was the most heavily used route to move cattle northward, and was best known for the six million cattle herded from Texas into Oklahoma and Kansas within less than 30 years. Between Cleburne and McGregor the Texas Eagle route parallels the Chisholm Cattle Trail. It was on this trail that the cowboy became a famous icon, and a state gained back its economy.

For centuries the Texas Longhorn had thrived in the Texas, but it was not until after the Civil War that these cattle were realized for their great potential to regenerate the Texas ranching industry. After the Civil War men came home to find their ranches in ruin, but soon realized that there were thousands of untamed Texas Longhorns roaming the countryside that could be sold for a great deal of money.

In the 1850's Kansas and Missouri closed their borders to Texas cattle, because many of the cattle carried the dreaded Texas fever. Cattlemen were frantically searching for markets where they could sell their surplus cattle. Some were driven to Louisiana, others to California. Joseph G. McCoy is credited with the idea to bring Texas cattle to the northern meat packing plants. This Illinois livestock dealer began a cattle shipping company out of Kansas, and knew that Texas cattle, worth only two dollars in the state, were worth more than ten times that amount up north. In order for cattle drivers to reach the shipping terminal, cattlemen drove millions of head of cattle up the trail that became known as the Chisholm Trail.

Originally the trail was only from the Red River north, but later Texas cowmen began calling the trail leading from the Rio Grande all the way to Kansas the Chisholm Trail.

The Chisholm Trail reached just far enough west to avoid the Texas fever laws, and within a few short years, Joseph McCoy's shipping terminal had proven to be a success. Millions of Longhorn cattle were pouring out of Texas into the North, thereby reviving the Texas cattle industry.

During this period in Texas cattle history, the Chisholm Trail was the center of business, but it was eventually closed by barbed wire. Over the years, historians have debated aspects of the trail's history -- including its name and exact route. Despite the controversies, the Chisholm Trail era put Texas on the map as the icon of the American cowboy and the route of the greatest migration of cattle in world history.

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